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1. Introduction: Regime and Societal Terrorism

The problem addressed here concerns whether and under what circumstances the use of terroristic violence by a state may become self-reproducing. First we will examine a specific set of cases from Central America, where a comparison helps clarify where terrorism has been reproduced and where it hardly occurs. Then arguments will be put forward that such state terrorism has occurred because of two major conditions. It was initiated by the act of *conquest* that introduced terrorism into a relationship between newly created ethnicities, the indigenous peoples, and Iberian conquerors. The terrorism is reproduced by the interaction of a conquest-produced, and ethnically divided society on the one hand, and an *ethnocratic regime* on the other.

The important distinction being made here is between state terrorism as a product of a regime (in this case the ethnocratic ladino governing elites of Guatemala) and as a product of intrasocietal relationships (here, that between the ruling ladino ethnicity, and the subordinated and equally large indigenous Mayan population). Both social organizations can potentially trigger terrorism; but when they exist within a single society, each can trigger the other.

2. The Central American Case

A. Mesoamerican Terrorism

In Central America, a tradition of state terrorism is to be found in El Salvador and Guatemala. It has been manifest in the relationship that has held between the state, currently dominated by an alliance of strong military establishment and agrarian oligarchic interests, and the indigenes and rural country people. It has been manifest in recent years by slaughters of thousands, principally of Indians. While much of this history is yet to be extracted from the records, the slaughter has been a calculated response by the state to what is perceived to be a threat of violence by the indigenes. This accounted for some 20,000 deaths in El Salvador in 1932, plus random aerial bombings and town slaughters during the present civil war. In Guatemala, slaughter of large numbers of Indians has been periodic since the institution of the great "Reform" of the 1870s. In recent years such events can be cited for deaths in the hundreds in specific cases in 1944 and 1978, and then a sweep of perhaps fifty to sixty thousand from 1979 to 1984. In the recent era the victims were generally accused of being party to communist conspiracies.

In contrast, indigenous rebellions in Panama in 1925 and in Nicaragua in the 1980s did not lead to any such slaughter. In Panama, the killing of some twenty-five individuals, including all the local police, by the Kuna Indians led not to a slaughter of the Kuna, but to a negotiated settlement of the indigenes' concerns, and the establishment of the Comarca de San Blas, a reservation area where the indigenes have internal political autonomy.

In contrast with the Guatemalan slaughter of indigenes in1979-1984, during the same period the Nicaraguan revolutionary government was severely challenged by some of the leadership of the Miskito indigenous population of the Atlantic coast. Some 20,000, perhaps as much as a quarter of the total Nicaraguan Miskito peoples, fled to Honduras, and many of the men formed guerrilla groups to fight along with the "Contra" forces being supplied by the United States. In spite of these overt militant activities, the Nicaraguan government did not resort to terroristic reprisals on the Miskito.[1]

B. The Historical Reason[2]

In looking for the historical reasons behind these differences, we begin prior to the Spanish conquest, when the indigenous societies of Central America varied in complexity, with more complex kingdoms, deriving from Mexican influences, occupying Mesoamerica, and less complex chiefdoms occupying the region to the east and south and most of the Atlantic coast east of Belize. These two regions—Mesoamerica to the northwest, and lower Central American to the southeast—reflected different histories, as the languages of the southeastern groups are generally related to others in South America, whereas those of Mesoamerica found their relationships to the north.

The importance of this difference at the time of the conquest, however, lay in the fact that the more complex Mesoamerica had harnessed its population into a labor force accustomed to working for their kings' own great projects, building political centers such as Utatlán, Iximché, Zaculeu in the Guatemalan highlands, and others in El Salvador. The Spanish thus found the Mesoamerican peoples easier to control in a labor force than were those of the chiefdoms of the southeast.

The Spanish conquered these two regions in different ways. Most of Mesoamerica was either vanquished by a single conqueror, Pedro de Alvarado, and placed rapidly under a labor system, or was left for a slower conquest by the church at

a later date, accomplishing the same thing. The southeast, in contrast, was conquered by various *conquistadores* who promptly enslaved most surviving indigenes.[3]

The differences between the two kinds of conquests led to different depopulation histories. While the entire area was heavily damaged by disease—even before the actual arrival of the conquest parties—the southeast was then depopulated by intensive and rapid enslavement of the Indians, leaving the region almost bereft of potential labor. In contrast, while there was some enslaving of Indians by the followers of Alvarado, Mesoamerica was by no means depopulated.

The overall consequence was a major differential in the number of Indians that were able to survive by 1550. Table 1 provides a summary of the contrasts. In comparison with lower Central America, Mesoamerica shows a significantly higher aboriginal survival, both relative to original population and in absolute number. In comparison with both Mesoamerica and the southeast, the Atlantic coast peoples, who were never conquered at all, show the greatest survival rate. The Spanish found this region unrewarding and previously uncontrolled, and never brought it under continuing control. Hence, after the initial population disasters, the surviving Indians in the Atlantic region of Central America were not seriously threatened demographically.

Out of the differences in pre-Columbian society, coupled with the different direct effects of the conquest, the southeast and Atlantic coast regions of Central America tended to evolve along lines quite different from those of Mesoamerica. The major difference was that where significant Indian populations survived, mainly in Nicaragua and Panama, they were not conquered, and hence were never brought into forced labor.

The Spanish society that grew up in Mesoamerica, in southeastern Guatemala and neighboring El Salvador, depended on the labor of both black slaves and Indians. As the conquerors reminded the Indians and slaves from time to time that they were coerced, a climate of fear persisted throughout the era. With independence, and the emergence of the liberal demand for export-oriented development, the harnessing of labor became even more intense and the institution of forced labor served to re-create this climate of fear in every subsequent generation.[4] Periodic revolts against the abuses and unfair, often inhuman, control practices were met with harsh punishment, and slaughters of Indians were acceptable means of control.[5]

C. The Roots of Fear

The roots of this fear lie in the fact that the failure to exterminate or assimilate a conquered people inevitably leaves a population with divided identities. The Spanish arrived in Mesoamerica under the assumption that hegemony over the peoples of the region had already been granted them by the papal bull of Alexander VI that divided the region (370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands) between Spain and Portugal in 1493. Victoria Bricker has argued that this established a "myth of pacification."[6] The Spanish assumed that all aboriginals were already subordinate to the hegemony of the Spanish crown and should obey and be treated as conquered peoples. Aboriginal resistance was therefore seen not as an understandable reluctance to be conquered, but rather as rank treason against the already duly constituted authority, against the crown's preordained hegemony.[7] The indigenous population hardly shared this view. The following centuries saw not only open revolts, but a strong, continuing sense of native autonomy. In many Guatemalan Indian communities today, the Dance of the Conquest, and that of the Moors and the Christians, as well as countless customs not readily evident to outsiders, keep alive the Indians' rejection of the conquest.[8]

The indigenes learned genuinely to fear the Spanish propensity and ability to use force and terror, and independence in the early nineteenth century brought no break in this. However, fear was not lodged with them alone. The Spanish, and the ladinos of postindependence Guatemala and El Salvador, were deeply apprehensive about native revolts. This anxiety was not unique to the New World, but replicated the urbanite's fear of peasant rebellions that is probably as old as civilization itself. In the Mesoamerican part of Central America, however, this fear danced in a dialectic with the Indian cultural memory. Thus, over subsequent centuries, the emerging ladino population feared the Indians as a potentially rebellious people who periodically had to be reminded of their conquered status; and the periodic reminders, quite naturally, regularly reinforced the Indians' fear of the Spanish—later ladino—political and economic dominance.

This is the core of the "Conquest Tradition." It involves a relationship in which both ethnicities harbor deep fears of the other's potential for violence and terror. The Indians deeply resent centuries of economic and political suppression and injustices, and strongly retain the myth that the state of conquest is not final. The ladinos fear the Indians because they are deeply dependent on them for their well-being, and the failure of the latter to produce some semblance of peaceful order is a

major threat to their political and economic security. Finally, both indigenes and ladinos have kept alive a wide range of descriptive ideas and projects about the ethnic qualities of the other. The "Conquest Tradition" is played out through a dialectic of performances that reproduce all of this, generation after generation.

3. The State and the Reproduction of Violence

A. Fear of Violence Is Fundamental to the State

In our concern for the abuses by the state in resorting to terrorism, it must not be forgotten that the state is an institution that is founded on violence; indeed, one might characterize the state as an institution that seeks to guarantee peace and harmony through the threat of violence. At its base, state governance rests on some degree of fear and apprehension of punishment or retribution. Indeed, civilization invented this when it invented the state. "Mere civilization," observed Kenneth Boulding, "the kind of society that stretches from ancient Sumer to, shall we say, Amin's Uganda—is not good enough. Its achievements, great as they are, have been paid for at a very high cost in human degradation, suffering, inequality, and dominance."[9] Populations are, therefore, conditioned to some fear; they become concerned when they find themselves particularly vulnerable.

Terrorism, however, exploits this fear in a particular way. It discredits confidence in customary sources of protection and safety—such as customary social reciprocities, the police, and so on. It maintains an inescapable and continuous state of fear and apprehension. Most important to this discussion, however, it threatens physical and psychological violence against oneself, or those with whom one especially identifies. It is this last—*the threat to the self, to self-identity*—that is especially important. Threatening the self-identity of an entire segment of the population is an immensely powerful instrument of psychological control.

Thus, while terrorism depends on discrediting much cognitive material, it also specifically accentuates the cognitive distinction between self and other.[10] That is, who is threatened versus who does the threatening. Thus, it places special emphasis on separate identities. In society, the solidarities most commonly created by identity systems are *ethnicities*.

B. Violence against Individuals and Social Groups

The present inquiry is concerned with the reproduction of terrorist violence, a somewhat special case within the much larger range of state terrorism that is current in

today's world. To clarify the circumstances that help explain this, we need to differentiate some other cases.

First concerns the targeted abuse of single individuals, often with the immediate purpose of eliminating the individual while indirectly warning others with political ambitions. The last three decades' killing of Guatemalan and El Salvadoran political figures illustrates the process. It is notable that, except for the Somozas' Nicaragua, such events have been rare in southeast Central America. It is, however, not unexpected in Mexico, another Mesoamerican country. This kind of killing is sponsored by a regime, and while it may show preference for killing people of particular ethnicities, it is likely to range more widely.

This kind of violence may precede the emergence of state terrorism practiced on a mass basis. This is usually rationalized by labeling a cognitive category as being so dangerous to the welfare of the state that its members must be eliminated. By far the most convenient and best known in Central America today is "Communist." The membership of such categories can be easily expanded from the identified individuals to include their associates, relatives, or people with any other perceived connection, be it ever so random and insubstantial. The outstanding case here was Argentina, where not only political figures, but family members and defense lawyers associated with them were additional targets.

The category of "Indio" is older and more fundamental than is "Communist," but the relative role of the two categories in the killing process may be somewhat misunderstood. The "Indio" category elicited slaughter long before the Communist label appeared, and it has effectively divided and inhibited the development of national identity in Mesoamerican countries since the conquest. Since the Russian revolution, however, the term "Communist" has been increasingly used as a way to give an international political rationale for the killing of Indians. Thus, rulers of El Salvador and Guatemala claim that they are intent on exterminating "Communism" when they set forth to kill indigenous and rural people.

C. Reproduction of State Terrorism

Most cases of state terrorism are classically characteristic of single regimes, and not of a continuing society as a whole. The regime of any state may indulge in state terrorist action under certain circumstances. One can readily cite Germany and Italy under the 1930 regimes; Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina in the 1970s; Chile under Pinochet; Paraguay under Stroessner; Santo Domingo under Trujillo; Nicaragua

under Somoza; and so on. It has been argued, drawing on O'Donnell's bureaucratic-authoritarian model, that such regimes are inherently repressive,[11] that their "political culture" predisposes them to resort to terrorism.

There is little question that these regimes resorted to political terrorism. But to characterize them as having a terrorist "political culture" predisposed to initiate the violence hardly clarifies anything. Culture is an adaptive process; people readily invent, borrow, and cast it off depending on how useful they believe it will be. If a regime does resort to violence, one might argue that it has such a political culture. But if one were to charge that the society at large had such a culture means that it would appear in previous and subsequent regimes. One cannot make this argument for these countries. For terrorist violence to be inherent in a culture—political or otherwise—it must exist as an operative part of existing societal relationships and among all parties to those relationships. It is patently difficult to argue that Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, or Brazil had political cultures of terrorism before the violence began in the 1960s and 1970. While such violence might reappear, in imitation of earlier regimes, there is little evidence that it has been embedded in a political culture in these societies.[12] Nor is it clear what mechanisms would make it easily reproduce itself.

4. Conquest and Ethnicity in State Terrorism

A. The Conquest Relationship

Having argued that some classic cases of state terrorism are not embedded in a political culture, and hence cannot be expected readily to reproduce state terrorism, I will now argue that in the case of Guatemala and El Salvador there is a mechanism, although probably not inherent in a "political culture," that has succeeded in leading state terrorism to reproduce itself. The mechanism derives from the Spanish military conquest that imposed ethnic division, creating a relationship that has regenerated the potential for killing in the colonial and republican generations ever since.

The relationship created by military conquest in Mesoamerica bears some examination. First, a military conquest creates a sharp contrast between the identities of the conqueror and the conquered. The victor's self-image involves extraordinary superiority, and sees the conquered as one who can only be securely controlled by violence and whose failure to conform is treasonous, and hence merits violence. There is necessity to use the violence that was used during the conquest. It is by no means the rational decision that it may appear to be, but rather an irrational assumption

that such violence is the "only way" to deal with the issues. Moreover, the periodic recourse to violence reinforces these usually unspoken assumptions.

Second, the conquered reject the implied inferiority of being, but recognize the de facto inferiority of status created by the conquest. Therefore, the conquered have to recognize that their native rights and abilities are frustrated if not actually violently repressed. Great care must be taken in dealing with the conqueror so long as the violent conquest relationship remains operative. This is, however, often impossible, and the subordinated peoples become threatening to the rulers. This is sometimes unintentional, but it is more often intentional, such as were the revolts in El Salvador in 1932 and in Guatemala in 1979-1984. The conquest relationship then elicits violence and slaughter from the descendants of the conquerors.

We are therefore proposing that in Guatemala and El Salvador state terrorism is derived from, and bound to, two related historical conditions: (1) The conquest of one society by another; and (2) the continuing separate social reproduction of the conquerors and the conquered. Moreover, the psychology of social relations that was created and active in the original conquest continues to be reproduced and to operate in the relations that hold within the conquest state.

B. The Reproduction of Ethnic Identity

The separate ethnic identities at stake here were created by the sixteenth-century conquest. When the conquerors arrived they were not Spaniards; rather, they were Castillians, Leonese, Asturianos, Galacianos, and so on. They gave the label "Indio" to a whole series of separate indigenous ethnicities. The conquerors only took on a common label later, choosing "Castillano" to label the shared identity that emerged in the face of conquered peoples, of imported slaves, and as a growing mestizo population challenged their identity.

To the members of an ethnicity, the reproduction of this identity is critical. The contemporary Guatemalan indigene is just as concerned for the continuation of his or her ethnic identity as is the ladino. Their very separateness makes it all the easier to be clear as to who stands on which side of the conquest relationship.

The self-identity of these ethnicities, however, does not, and need not, conform to the view from the outside. What the ruling ladinos of the state choose to include as being equivalent to "Indio" may well include a wide range of rural country people. For some rural indigenes, urban, university-educated indigenes may appear and act like ladinos. In El Salvador today there are many urbanites who doubt that

there are many indigenous people in the country at all. They see only rural country people. There is, however, a sizable population that so identify themselves, many of whom speak the Nahuatl language, and who are aware of what they regard as a systematic tendency of the ladino-run state military to do them violence.[13] They, and their much more numerous Guatemalan brothers and sisters, know who was there before the conquest, and are jealous and bitter concerning their role in the contemporary world.

5. Conclusions

In Guatemala and El Salvador regime-sponsored state terrorism keeps the conquest-based relationship between the major ethnicities alive and virulent. The fear and often hatred that is ensconced within the relationship between the two populations is usually, as in many civilized societies, hidden behind patterns of interaction in which rural indigenes feign humility and ladinos assume patronizing and superior attitudes. It is founded in systematic differences in control over land and resources, and in a system of laws that inhibit any easy solution for the indigenous people, as an ethnic sector, to change materially their collective poverty.

The Guatemalan and Salvadoran states confront somewhat different problems since the latter hardly know who comprise the indigenous population. In Guatemala, however, the.indigenous presence is pervasively visible and increasingly audible. The Revolution of 1944, the benefits of which were suppressed and lost, coupled with a political awareness[14] that raged like a fire through the western highlands between 1976 and 1984, have created a new indigenous awareness. It is one that is much less willing to humbly retreat, much more willing to confront the state apparatus directly, and much more willing to think of slaughter not merely as something that indigenes have to suffer.

Regime terrorism has, until now, been one of the principal instruments of the periodic regeneration of the conquest relationship between the major ethnicities in Guatemala and El Salvador, reinforcing the ethnic differences and fostering terrorism within the society at large. By the same token, the ladinos' identity system has depended on this terrorism for the security needed by a conqueror of an indigenous people who refuse to accept that they have been conquered.

Thus, fear generated by ethnic differences reinforces the tendency of an ethnocratic state to resort to terrorism when dealing with the subordinate indigenous population. When the slaughter is launched, the fear itself is augmented within the societal relations, thus making more likely the possibility that it will, in turn, trigger further state terrorism.

Notes

1. George A. Lopez, in an analysis of state terrorism in Latin America, lists "conditions under which rulers resort to state terrorism"; one of these is as a "strategy to control identifiable minority groups within the society," and cites Paraguay and Brazil against Indian, Argentina against Jews, and Nicaragua against the Miskito Indians. The present argument obviously disagrees with his judgment as it concerns Nicaragua. ("Terrorism in Latin America," in Michael Stohl, ed., *The Politics of Terrorism*, Third Ed., Revised and Expanded, New York and Basel: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1988, p. 516.)

2 This section and the next are modified extracts from my paper "The Conquest Tradition of Mesoamerica," forthcoming in *Americas*.

3. The differences among the *conquistadores* have been highlighted for me by a work in progress by Samuel Stone, on the ruling classes in Central America, and I am indebted to his work for some of the details in this treatment. It began in 1514, with expeditions sent by Pedrarias Dávila from Panama, was followed by Francisco Hernández de Córdova to conquer Nicaragua in 1526, and by Gil González Dávila who explored the Pacific coast from the Bay of Fonseca to Nicoya in 1522. There then ensued a series of conquerors and fights among them that Stone has well summarized: "The conquest of Central America was characterized by confusion, for zones of influence were defined amid contradictions."

4. The effects of the Liberal Reform in Guatemala and El Salvador have been chronicled in many places. For a general treatment, see R. L. Woodward, 1976, *Central America, a Nation Divided*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, Chapter 6; more specialized are J. C. Cambranes, "Las comunidades indígenas y inicios de la economía de plantación moderna en Guatemala." Paper presented at LASA meetings, New Orleans, March 1988; J. C. Cambranes, *Coffee and Peasants: The Origins of the Modern Plantation Economy in Guatemala, 1853–1897*. Woodstock, Vt.: CIRMA/Plumstock Mesoamerican Studies, 1985, and Lowell Gudmundson, *Costa Rica before Coffee*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

5. See David McCreery, LASA paper.

6. Victoria Bricker, *The Indian Christ, the Indian King: The Historical Substrates of Maya Myth and Ritual*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 6.

7. See Robert S. Chamberlain, *The Conquest and Colonization of Yucatan*, Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication 582. Washington, D.C.: 1948, p. 27

8. See Bricker, *Indian Christ*, p. 6.; on contemporary customs, see comments by Rigoberta Menchu.

9. *Ecodynamics: A New Theory of Societal Evolution*. Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1978, p. 302.

10. This does not contradict the report that victims of torture may identify with the torturer, a situation that occurs in the actual experience of suffering prolonged violence.

11. George A. Lopez, "Terrorism in Latin America," in Michael Stohl, ed., *The Politics of Terrorism*, Third Ed., Revised and Expanded, New York and Basel: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1988, pp. 497-524.

12. Ted Robert Gurr, "The Political Origins of State Violence and Terror: A Theoretical Analysis." In Michael Stohl and George A. Lopez, eds., *Governmental Violence and Repression: An Agenda for Research*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, pp. 45-72, argues for this imitative process.

13. Judith Maxwell's estimate of percentages works out to to be a figure above 350,000. See her "Nahuatl-Pipil; 'Muy Politico'," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 17-19, Winter 1982.

14. See Victor Montejo's *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*, Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1987; Elizabeth Burgos, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1985; and the increasing literature from organizations of protest and revolutionary groups.